

VZCZCXRO3202
RR RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV
DE RUEHEG #6902/01 3231155
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 191155Z NOV 06
FM AMEMBASSY CAIRO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2613
INFO RUEHXK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE
RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CAIRO 006902

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR INR/I, NSC FOR DORAN AND WATERS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/14/2016

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KISL](#) [EG](#)

SUBJECT: INCREASED ASSERTIVENESS OF THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD

REF: A. CAIRO 6780

[¶](#)B. CAIRO 6799

[¶](#)C. CAIRO 5709

Classified By: Acting Deputy Chief of Mission William R. Stewart,
for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

[¶](#)11. (C) Summary: In recent weeks, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) has been noticeably more assertive across the Egyptian political scene, demonstrating an increased tactical muscularity and confidence that markedly differs from the past. In a variety of proving grounds - parliament, labor elections, and student elections - the MB is vigorously challenging the Mubarak government and National Democratic Party (NDP). Tensions between the government and MB are high, as the MB's increasing self-assurance and combative tactical approach, combined with the GOE's heavy-handed reaction, signals a shifting of the parameters of the delicate balance that governs the GOE-MB relationship. End Summary.

MB UPS THE ANTE IN PARLIAMENT ...

[¶](#)12. (C) In a development unprecedented in recent parliamentary history, MB bloc leader Sa'ad al Katatni challenged (unsuccessfully) incumbent People's Assembly Speaker Fathi Surour for his post (which he has held for 16 years) in November 8 internal parliamentary elections (Ref A). This episode was in marked contrast to the 2005-2006 parliamentary session, when the MB bloc supported Surour for the Speaker's job. Two of Katatni's MB colleagues (Hussein Ibrahim and Mohamed el Ganayni) also contested the elections for the two deputy speaker positions, but, like Katanani, lost to the NDP incumbents (in the race for Speaker, the final vote tally was 319 for Surour, 79 for Katatni). The elections were contentious, with cries of "fraud" ringing from the MB bloc, newspapers reporting on fistfights between NDP and MB MP's on the floor of the Assembly, and results of the vote reportedly announced by Shoura Council Speaker Safwat El Sherif a full two hours before voting had even taken place. MP Mustafa Mohamed Sherdi (of the Al Wafd Party, and the opposition representative on the parliamentary committee charged with supervising the elections), told poloff that the fraud was "patently obvious ... I myself watched some NDP MP's vote numerous times." Sherdy noted that, "the MB parliamentarians are furious, and they have every right to be." (Note: It is not clear why the NDP would resort to "stealing" an election that, due to the preponderance of NDP parliamentarians in the People's Assembly, it would already doubtless win. One possible explanation is that Surour, who enjoys being viewed as a "consensus man" and who has never won the Speaker's seat with less than 97-percent of the votes, hoped to maintain at least the appearance of that overwhelming majority again. End note).

¶3. (SBU) In a press conference prior to the opening of Parliament, MB bloc leader Katatni told reporters that the MB will adopt a new "confrontational stand" in the People's Assembly in an effort to send "several messages" to the NDP, among them that, "...With opposition and independent MP's now occupying twenty-five percent of the seats, the NDP should abandon its tactic of ostracizing the opposition and accept that it must share power and positions" MB parliamentary bloc spokesman Hamdi Hassan, in comments to Al Ahram Weekly, said that, "NDP heavyweights still like to ignore it (the increase in MB MP's to 88), but after the recent crackdown against us, they must know that the rules have to change and that for every action there is a reaction ... Even if we were not able to win any of the Assembly's three key posts, we have many tools to embarrass the ruling party and its government."

¶4. (SBU) Hassan reportedly also noted that the MB plans to focus during the coming session on enforcing existing but rarely utilized internal parliamentary regulations, such as Article 79, which requires cabinet ministers to report to the assembly after trips abroad, and amending the 27-year old parliamentary procedures: "They were drafted in a way that prevents MP's from effectively scrutinizing the government's performance and it is high time they changed." Leading MB parliamentarian Hussein Ibrahim recently commented to reporters that during the new session, MB MP's plan to request "parliamentary interrogations" of several cabinet ministers, chief among them Interior Minister Habib el Adly (who is particularly loathed by the MB). Such tactics, in addition to the sure-to-be contentious forthcoming debate over President Mubarak's proposed constitutional amendments package, set the stage for further confrontation between the

CAIRO 00006902 002 OF 003

NDP and MB in the legislative arena.

... ACTIVELY PARTICIPATES IN LABOR UNION ELECTIONS...

¶5. (C) As reported ref B, the MB is energetically contesting the ongoing national labor union elections, which have been marked thus far by allegations of government harassment of MB-affiliated candidates, protests surrounding reported GOE meddling, and the apparent denial of access to union offices to MB-affiliated candidates (so that they cannot be credentialed as required before the elections). While a limited number of MB candidates ran in the 1991, 1996, and 2001 labor union elections, contacts tell us that there has been a "qualitative change" in the MB's outreach and campaigning this time around, as the organization aggressively joins the workers' electoral fray. Most notably, for the first time, the MB is running candidates in the elections of 22 out of the 23 national unions (not participating only in the tourism industry union race), in contrast to previous years, when MB candidates ran in just a handful of the union contests. Veteran activists report that while the MB has always had "some presence" in the trade unions, "this is the first time they have launched a concerted campaign, having previously focused their attention on the 'white-collar' professional syndicates."

¶6. (C) In another new development, the MB's spokesman for the labor union elections, MP Saber Aboul Fotouh, threatened publicly that the MB would form an "independent workers union" if union elections were rigged. Although MB Supreme Guide Mohamed Mehdi Akef subsequently walked-back the MB's public line - "If and when this (election rigging) happens, and our Labor Bureau brings it up, I will decide then (whether to support the formation of a shadow labor union)" - Aboul Fotouh's comments have created a significant buzz among the press, labor activists, and political parties about the MB's newly muscular role in the labor realm.

... AND VIGOROUSLY CONTESTS STUDENT ELECTIONS

¶ 17. (SBU) On university campuses across Egypt, the first week of November was marked by sit-ins and sometimes violent protests, as undergraduates demonstrating against the disqualification of MB-affiliated students from student body elections clashed with security forces, hired thugs, and other students. Pro-MB students, chanting "National Security, get out, this is our university and it will remain free; who runs the university, the dean or the Internal Security Services?" reportedly protested on campuses in Cairo and throughout Egypt's governorates. Tensions were highest at Helwan University, where administrators allegedly removed the names of 520 MB-affiliated nominees from the preliminary candidates list ahead of the elections. Twenty-eight undergraduates (twenty-one of them who had been nominated to be candidates) were subsequently arrested in a November 5 pre-dawn raid of a Helwan University dorm, sparking further campus protests.

¶ 18. (SBU) Other universities attempted to cope with the issue differently. At Ain Shams and Al Minya Universities, most of the student government positions reportedly ended up being appointed by faculty rather than elected. According to independent press reports, at the venerable Al Azhar University, officials controlled the situation by announcing the elections (for 2,880 student government positions) only two hours before they were held. At Helwan, Ain Shams, and Minya universities, tens of students are reportedly being "interrogated" by the police on charges of "rioting and obstructing classes" during the elections. MB Supreme Guide Mehdi Akef denounced the arrests of the Helwan University students, and overall "government interference" in the elections as "despotism." In the wake of the elections at Cairo University, where it appears MB-affiliated students were shut-out of candidates lists, MB student leaders complained publicly that they were not allowed to participate in elections, and have threatened to hold new "free and fair" elections, to create a "parallel, shadow student federation."

¶ 19. (C) A civil society contact who visited the MB's "election headquarters" at Cairo University remarked to poloff that she was impressed and surprised by how well-organized MB efforts seemed to be - "they had a bank of plasma TV screens, broadcasting news footage, and dozens of volunteers scurrying around." Our contacts overall agree that student elections in previous years, while sometimes confrontational, have never been nearly as violent, tense, or as publicized.

CAIRO 00006902 003 OF 003

Independent newspapers reported November 13 that Parliament's Education Committee, in an unprecedented move, plans to "review the student elections, security excesses, deletion of opposition students from candidate lists, and the clear rigging that was recorded by the media."

COMMENT

¶ 110. (C) Some observers view the MB's new assertiveness, particularly in Parliament, as a calculated reaction to the GOE's continuing campaign of detaining its members (Ref C), as well as to the government's recent refusal to allow several MB leaders, including the Supreme Guide, to travel abroad. Tensions between the Mubarak government and MB are undoubtedly high, as the MB's increasing self-assurance and combative tactical approach, combined with the GOE's heavy-handed reaction, signals a shift in the delicate balance of the GOE-MB relationship.

¶ 111. (C) In the coming months, it is expected that the government will explore new legalistic means of controlling the MB's political participation, including a potential law

that would ban demonstrations in mosques, and a proportional representation electoral system that could restrict the ability of independents to run in future parliamentary elections. Such possible developments, combined with anticipated fiery parliamentary debates and resultant demonstrations over contentious constitutional amendments, as well as the apparent willingness of the MB since this summer's Lebanon crisis to strongly and publicly criticize the regime, will likely give rise to continued, and perhaps increased, strains in the decades-old GOE-MB dynamic of controlled confrontation.

RICCIARDONE